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OESTERLEY'S 'SAYINGS OF THE JEWISH FATHERS'¹

SINCE Taylor's well-known edition of the *Sayings of the Jewish Fathers*, this tractate of the Mishna has attracted more and more attention on the part of Christian scholars, and its value as an aid in the study of New Testament diction, idiom, and doctrine has received wide recognition. The inclusion of Herford's *Pirke Aboth* in Charles's *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* marked an advance in this direction and the present work, once more brings this tractate of the Mishna to the attention of the Christian student, and to the notice of the lay reader.

In paragraph II of the introduction, 'Importance of the tractate for the Study of the New Testament', the author, after calling attention to the many Greek words common to *Aboth* and the Gospels, as well as to theological phrases which occur in both, concludes with a statement which points to the main purpose of the work :

'But even more important than all that has been said is the doctrinal standpoint of *Pirke Aboth* ; for here we get, as nowhere else, the doctrinal position of orthodox Judaism, as this existed during the New Testament period. The doctrine of God, of the Law, of Works, of Merit, of Sin, of Grace, and Free-will, not to mention subsidiary points, are all referred to in the tractate specifically or incidentally or implicitly. From the point of view of the study and understanding of the New Testament, the importance of *Pirke Aboth* can hardly be exaggerated.'

The notes to the translation, besides elucidating the text by rabbinic parallels, call abundant attention to New Testament references.

¹ *The Sayings of the Jewish Fathers*. By W. O. E. OESTERLEY, D.D. London : SOCIETY FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE. New York : MACMILLAN COMPANY, 1919. pp. xx + 103.

The translation is based on the Hebrew text of Strack's edition and, though the author refers for detailed critical notes to Taylor and to Hoffmann, he nevertheless ventures a list of the more important MSS. (IV), and in the notes frequently passes judgement on the validity of this or that reading. The list is rather curious for its omissions. It quotes virtually all the MSS. included in Strack's *Einleitung* with the exception of the famous Kaufmann MS. in Buda Pesth and the even more important Parma MS. of the Mishna (codex de Rossi No. 138). These versions rank higher than any of those included in the list and therefore Strack, though he makes only occasional and eclectic use of them, gives them the most prominent position. Most of the MSS. mentioned by Dr. Oesterley are of the seventeenth century and therefore comparatively unimportant in establishing the correct reading. The author of course cannot be held accountable for a complete enumeration of textual sources in the limited space allotted to him, but the selection he has made from the printed lists already at hand is not an altogether happy one. One is also somewhat surprised, in view of the author's disclaimer of original research in the text, to find certain rather sweeping judgements embodied in the introduction, as well as in the notes. Thus we are told (IV):

'The text of Pirke Aboth is, with few exceptions, quite straightforward; the various readings do not often affect the sense of a passage,'

a statement which the reviewer does not believe to be borne out by the facts, even as presented in Taylor's Appendix. The wide use to which Aboth was put as part of the liturgy gave the text a more complex history than that undergone by any other tractate of the Mishna, and the variants very frequently present not merely different readings, but readings clearly opposite in sense. An example of this and of the unsatisfactory fashion in which the little work before us disposes of the matter is seen on p. 43, where the saying of Rabbi Akiba is dealt with:

'Everything is foreseen and free-will given, and the world is judged by grace, yet all is according to the abundance of work.'

The author's note states: 'Four MSS. read "not according to . . ." ; but the above is evidently the correct reading'. Here at least the variant presents a view quite different from that found in the current text. Then, too, when one realizes that, besides the four MSS. referred to by the author, there are innumerable others containing, not only this variant, but almost every other possible variant on the theme in question and that, furthermore, the rejected reading is mentioned by Duran (in *Magen Aboth*) as having been found by him not only in liturgical versions, but in MSS. of the Mishna that were old in his day (משניות קדומות), the correct reading does not strike one as quite so 'evident'. It is just possible that the current version and its variants may all be explanatory glosses, and that the original saying may have ended with the words: 'and the world is judged by grace'.

Another example of arbitrary criticism of the text without exhaustive examination is found on p. 47 where, to the phrase, 'the essentials of the Halakoth', גופי הלכות, the author remarks: 'One MS. reads "Torah" but wrongly'. As a matter of fact Strack quotes the Cambridge, as well as the Parma MS. in support of גופי תורה, though he himself maintains the reading הלכות and shows that the Cambridge MS. has the word הלכות after תורה. Taylor quotes a parallel passage from the Mishna in corroboration of the reading גופי תורה (Appendix, p. 154). In the face of all this, the positive assertion in the textual note of our book is scarcely called for.

The translation, though on the whole painstaking and exact is at times unnecessarily flat and fails to reproduce the dignity of style and thought in the original, even when that might be done without sacrifice of exactness. Why translate אף על פי שיש בידו מעשים טובים אין לו חלק לעולם הבא 'He has no portion in the world to come, even though there be good works to his credit', when one might with equal faithfulness to the Hebrew, render it: 'Though possessed of good works, yet has he no share in the world to come'. Again one is tempted to ask, why obscure the deeply humanistic tendency of the saying: 'With whomsoever the spirit of mankind is pleased, the Spirit of God is

pleased ; and with whomsoever the spirit of mankind is not pleased, the Spirit of God, is not pleased' by appending to it the rather tasteless and pedantic remark : 'This saying is not to be taken in a literal sense ; it is a general statement expressive of the belief that there is a correspondence of things in heaven and earth' (p. 38).

All this, however, need not blind us to the many merits of the undertaking and to the spirit of fairness which, on the whole, pervades it. Some of the notes are remarkably successful in compressing into very small space a wealth of material culled from the Bible, the Talmud, and the New Testament. Witness note 7, p. 3 ; n. 9, p. 7 ; n. 7, p. 30 (on the subject of the Shekhinah) ; n. 1, p. 34 ; n. 3, p. 42 (dealing with the Torah as an instrument of creation), and n. 8, p. 53 (concerning the rabbinic doctrine of repentance). The book contains an index of subjects as well as of Biblical references.

JACOB KOHN.

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